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From our mothers' arms: the intergenerational impact of residential schools in Saskatchewan

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in most periods of history death is seen as a tragedy, an inevitable enemy that cannot be defeated, and a mystery that cannot be fully understood. How to cope with death is the universal problem of life. Christianity alone offers a unique and satisfying solution – because Jesus died and conquered death, in his resurrection we too shall live.

The rest of the book focuses on death and resurrection specifically in the New Testament through the Gospels (section two), the Pauline Epistles (section three) and the books of Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation (section four). Through these excellent biblical book studies the reader is left with the overwhelming impression that the resurrection of Jesus and subsequent granting of eternal life to his followers, is the central doctrine of the New Testament, the cornerstone of Christianity, and *the* event that separates the ages into “old” and “new”. As a result, this reader has begun looking at his own and others’ preaching in a new light, to see how implicitly or explicitly the good news of resurrection life is mentioned. After reading this book, one will be more inspired to believe and preach the foundation of our faith.

While the book is strong in its biblical, theological, and historical portrayal of death and resurrection, it does not help readers to see the daily practical consequences of this belief. Pastors and lay people who struggle to know what resurrection life means in the here and now will have to figure it out themselves or read another kind of book. Another minor criticism is that with so many authors the book does not flow as well chapter to chapter. Arguments do not build on each other, many facts are repeated throughout, and the writing style is necessarily uneven. Still, the overall theme unifies the work and the reader has the advantage of being exposed to twelve different writers. This makes it a very worthwhile read!

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From Our Mothers’ Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential Schools in Saskatchewan

Constance Deiter

Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1999

100 pages

“The schools forcibly removed these children from the influence of their parents and community, and their gentle teachings. Once at school, the children

were stripped of their personal possessions, identity, family, and tribal associations; given numbers and herded into dormitories where the dehumanizing process of assimilation began" (81).

Constance Dieter is a Plains Cree from Peepeekisis First Nation in Southern Saskatchewan. Combining her journalism with her legal experience and her degrees in anthropology, she has put together here an invaluable contribution to understanding the negative and intergenerational impacts of residential schools.

Through her careful and caring research, she gives voice to people who have been silenced by the "dominant culture", and promotes justice and healing especially with First Nations' people. "It is only within the past thirty years that any serious research has been done to examine the Indian residential school experience. Previous research was directed at the systemics of teaching Indian children, but not at the experiences of the children themselves. In fact, the earliest comprehensive report on Indian education in Canada was not completed until 1966, and even then, the study did not discuss the living conditions of the children" (3).

This book focuses on "the experiences of the children themselves". The author paints a "picture of the residential school experience from the eyes and memories of First Nations people" (5), with the actual interviews coming from individuals in her own community and extended family. "The result is a journey to understanding the effects Indian residential schools had and continue to have on the lives of Indian people of Saskatchewan" (10).

The seven different interview stories in large part reveal that those effects have been largely negative, humiliating, and depersonalizing. They have also been intergenerational in their pervasive impacts. The less than human living conditions and abusive practices within the residential schools have left indelible scars for a long time and over generations. The publishers summarize these impacts well in their words on the back cover: "From those who recall their school years as 'difficult' to those who remember harsh and frequent abuse, this litany of memories reveals the devastation visited upon a culture when families are divided, ritual suppressed, and language discouraged."

From Our Mothers' Arms, while devoting itself primarily to residential schools in Saskatchewan and those that were once run by the United Church of Canada, is a must read for anyone with a passion for justice and a desire for healing. This is not an easy read, but a necessary read for both clergy and laity, regardless of denomination – for education, advocacy and pastoral care purposes.

In providing helpful and sufficient background to residential schools, including government and ecclesial involvements, as well as providing candid and revealing interviews from First Nations' people in their gripping, revealing and disturbing stories of personal experiences, and detailed substantive reflections

(Chapter 11) by the author herself on “The Effects of Residential Schools”, Constance Deiter invites – actually urges – the reader to participate not only in an educational journey but also in a transformative ministry. It is clear that these stories must be told and heard so that the resolve, the courage, and the processes for healing can continue.

Robert S. Smith, Moderator of The United Church of Canada, Sudbury, 1986
– “Apology Statement to Native Congregations in The United Church of Canada”
– emphasizes this essential journey and ministry:

Long before my people journeyed to this land, your people were here, and you received from your elders understanding of creation and mystery that surrounds us all, that was deep and to be treasured. We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the values of your spirituality. We confused western ways and culture ways, the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. We tried to make you like us and in doing so we helped destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result you and we are poorer. And the image of the creator in us is twisted and blurred and we are not what we are meant to be. We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the spirit of Christ so that our people may be blessed and God’s creation healed (quoted on vii).

In reading this book, I found myself deeply stirred by the participants’ revealing stories and the author’s searching reflections. “These stories provide some insight into the residential school experience that only the students who attended these schools can provide. The stories do not rely on any archival or government records, only the memories of those who tell them. But they are important...” (71).

I also learned a lot not only about residential schools, but also how the church was “part of the process of pain” and is “now called to be part of the process of healing” (88). Knowledge of the history and present day realities of First Nations’ People is a necessary first step in the processes of healing. *From Our Mothers’ Arms* is primarily an “awareness builder” and as such is a necessary read. The detailed notes for each chapter and the extensive bibliography are helpful for the further pursuit of related documents and data.

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